

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 25, 2019

Agenda Item: Sharp-tailed Grouse Reintroduction in Western Montana

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

Although sharp-tailed grouse (STGR) are classified as an upland game bird in Montana, there has been no hunting season in the western part of the state since 1948. Since 1984, restoration and conservation of STGR in western Montana has remained an FWP priority. Populations west of the Continental Divide were believed to be extirpated by the mid-2000s. FWP and partners completed an assessment of habitat quality in 2015. They found large areas of habitat in the Blackfoot, Clark Fork, and Bitterroot valleys equivalent to that available within the birds' range in north central Montana. If past habitat changes caused the original declines, then the conditions have recovered sufficiently to now support populations. If other factors caused past declines, then monitoring of transplanted birds is the only way to identify current limiting factors. STGR source populations have remained stable likely due to large landscapes of suitable habitat. Removal of up to 180 STGR annually from source populations would be minor in comparison to hunter harvest (less than 1 percent of the estimated 2017 harvest).

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review on Feb. 15, 2019 and asked for public comment through March 17, 2019. FWP ran legal ads describing the proposed project, the availability of the draft EA, and the public hearing information in nine newspapers across the state. The draft EA was posted on FWP's official website and was also available at all regional headquarters and the state headquarters in Helena, and online for people with internet access or through internet services at public libraries. FWP received 52 comments and addressed issues raised in the decision notice.

Alternatives and Analysis

The EA evaluated five alternatives. These include Alternative A, the *No Action Alternative*; Alternative B, *Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond Area*; Alternative C, *Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Northern Bitterroot Valley*; Alternative D, *Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley and the Drummond Area*; and Alternative E, *Reintroduce STGR to the Blackfoot Valley*.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

Results from several years of habitat work and population viability analyses suggest that FWP can restore and maintain three populations of STGR that have a 95 percent probability of persistence for 50 years. Reintroducing STGR to western Montana will return a native species to its former range, is recommended in the State Wildlife Action Plan, and is a priority of the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program. FWP recommends the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve the reintroduction of STGR to western Montana.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve Alternative B, the reintroduction of sharp-tailed grouse into Blackfoot Valley, Northern Bitterroot Valley, and the Drummond areas of western Montana as proposed by FWP.